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ABSTRACT

Semistructured interviews were used to query school staffs, administrators, and school board members in this exploratory field study of successful high schools implementing an individualized program. Analysis of results suggest these possible findings regarding factors that may support or inhibit the implementation of innovations: (1) The most important intraorganizational factor supporting implementation appeared to be the principal; (2) most teachers reported being ill-prepared in the new behaviors; (3) a decline of staff dedication and commitment was usually credited to "burn out"--the emotional and physical exhaustion of maintaining old programs while starting new ones; (4) there were no procedures for assimilating new teachers into new programs; (5) the superintendent appeared to be the key person outside the school sustaining the program; (6) decentralized district management seemed to facilitate innovative practices; (7) centralized curriculum seemed to facilitate the practices; (8) extraordinary funding was not necessary for implementation; and (9) needed formal support systems with other institutions were absent. These findings suggest issues that should be considered by staffs planning to implement or refine innovative practices. (Author/JM)

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FACTORS SUPPORTING OR INHIBITING INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

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FACTORS SUPPORTING OR INHIBITING INNOVATIVE PRACTICES IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

What keeps an innovative secondary school practice alive once it has been first implemented? Also, what leads to the downfall of the same practice? These were the central questions of a recent study supported by the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Individualized Schooling. The purpose of the study was to identify the intra- and extraorganizational factors which either support or inhibit the adoption and maintenance of innovative practices in a sample of selected senior high schools.

The following questions were utilized as the basis for interviews of administrators, counselors, teachers, school board members, and central office administrators in six school districts from across the country:

a. What are the influences which relate to the initial adoption and eventual maintenance of innovative practices in selected senior high schools?

b. What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of those influences?

c. What are the relationships between and among the identified influences?

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected principally through the use of semi-structured interviews. Respondents were asked to identify both supportive and inhibitive factors in the internal and external environments as these factors related to the innovative practices in their schools. In each school, the principal, at least one assistant principal, Teachers from a cross-section of different subject departments, counselors, two or more central office administrators, and a member of the local school board were interviewed. In addition to interviews, observations of relevant meetings took place at each site, and documents were collected and examined.

Since this was an exploratory field study, a purposive sample, rather than a random one, was utilized. Consequently, the six high schools were "selected schools,"

chosen because it was believed that visiting them would offer the most comprehensive understanding of the issues under investigation.

The study included six senior high schools that enjoyed reputations for having implemented programs of individualized schooling. One set of criteria for selecting the schools was that they were all expected to have had implemented at least three of the following elements of a design for individualized secondary schooling proposed by Herbert Klausmeier (1977):

1. There is a schoolwide shared decision making body which enables administrators, teachers, counselors, and others to participate in making decisions which are related to their interests.

2. A teacher-advisor program is utilized as a way for each teacher to work with a small group of students on a continuing basis for educational, personal, and social advisement.

3. Teachers and students are organized into smaller units for instructional and advising purposes and to reduce the scale of operations in the school.

4. Objective-based instruction is utilized in at least the required academic subject areas as a way to allow teachers to work with students in planning, carrying out, and evaluating educational programming for the individual student.

5. A systematic program of career education and/or work experience is available to all students in the school.

6. An explicit statement of philosophy encouraging students to accept responsibility for making decisions related to their own educational programs exists.

7. Curricular materials are designed to be utilized in support of educational programming for the individual student.

To find the most appropriate schools, professional journals were examined, national and state agencies were contacted, and experts in American secondary education were consulted for recommendations concerning high schools to include in the study. Initially, approximately 25 schools were identified as possible research sites.

The group of schools was further narrowed based on the desire to vary the type, geographic location, and the size of the districts and the schools. The six schools represented medium-sized cities, and suburban and rural districts with student populations ranging from 3,000 to over 40,000. Enrollments in the selected schools ranged from about 700 to over 2,000. Schools were located in different regions of the United States.

Data collected through interviews were analyzed by extracting important and recurring information related to the relevant variables. This process of analysis had the objective of converting "raw" phenomena into data which could be treated in "essentially a scientific member so that a body of knowledge can be built up" (Cartwright, 1966).

As data were analyzed, concepts from a number of theoretical domains emerged to explain the observed phenomena. This was inevitable since no overarching theory explains the relationships between intra- and extraorganizational factors. Consequently, findings of the study are reported in light of constructs from leadership theory (House, 1971) change theory (Hage and Aiken, 1971) and the axiomatic theory of organizations (Hage, 1965).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. The most important intraorganizational supportive factor was the leadership behavior of the principal.

Specifically, depending on the change phase in which an innovative school's program was located (i.e., initial awareness, changover, routinization, or refinement), different leadership behaviors were perceived to be more appropriate. The earlier a school was in the development of its innovative program, then the more desirable it appeared for the principal to exhibit participative leadership by encouraging a high degree of staff involvement in decision making. As innovative programs were

routinized and entered a refinement phase, instrumental leadership behavior on the part of the principal became desirable. Supportive leadership behavior was valued at all stages of the change process.

2. New teaching behaviors were necessary to support the innovative practices, and most teachers reported being ill-prepared in these new behaviors.

Teachers who were supportive of their school's innovative practices were those who were willing to adapt to new roles and responsibilities as they were developed in conjunction with the innovative practices; those who were comfortable in situations requiring a great deal of planning and communication; and those who understood the necessity of relying on the talents and expertise of other staff members.

Respondents indicated that such behaviors were generally acquired after service in the schools with innovative programs. They were not prepared through conventional teacher education programs to work in the schools.

3. A "burn-out" factor resulted in an eventual decline of staff dedication and commitment so important to the initial development of innovative programs.

The implementation of innovative practices, as noted earlier, required new behaviors on the part of teachers and other staff members. During the initial awareness and implementation stages of the change process, teachers were expected to maintain their traditional classroom duties while also participating in the creative processes necessary for the design of new educational programs. Teachers were expected to attend additional meetings, serve on special planning committees, visit other high schools, rewrite curricular materials, and still teach their classes.

Activities requiring substantial role enlargement ultimately led to a "burn-out" of teachers in some cases. This was a time when staff members felt they could go no further in the creative process because they were emotionally, if not physically, exhausted. At such time, staff dedication and commitment to innovative

practices declined. Some teachers even wished to revert to a more "comfortable" role, as in the period prior to the innovation.

4. Typically, procedures for assimilating new teachers into the innovative schools were absent.

Teachers new to the schools with innovative practices seldom attained the same degree of understanding of the practices as did staff members involved in the initial development and implementation. Schools typically lacked the mechanisms for ensuring that new teachers, whether recruited from traditional high schools or directly from teacher education programs in colleges, could become acclimated to the innovative schools with the requisite understanding of new procedures and structures. As the original teachers were replaced, innovative practices tended to lose their initial thrust.

The fact that new teachers were not prepared for innovative programs was also attributable to deficiencies in college-level teacher education programs. Some programs emphasized the preparation of subject matter specialists without serious attempts to develop teacher skills in decision making, human relations, interpersonal communication, or group dynamics. When beginning teachers started working in schools which did not emphasize departmental organizations, for example, they were somewhat lost. Another consequence was that schools had to expend considerable time and resources to train incoming teachers so that they could work comfortably in the innovative schools.

5. Just as the principal is the key person who supported the innovation within the school, the district superintendent provides the leadership necessary for sustaining the program from outside the school.

Superintendents supported innovative programs in two ways. First, where communities and school boards were reluctant to support the innovation, the superintendent tended to act as a mediator between the community and the school. Second,

the superintendent could establish a districtwide climate conducive to innovation. This climate could be created through the use of personnel practices which recruited innovative persons for administrative positions throughout the district. Since principals were the key intraorganizational supporters of innovation, hiring persons with dispositions toward an innovative practice such as individualized schooling ensured the continuation of a particular philosophy in the schools.

6. Decentralized district management procedures facilitated the adoption and maintenance of innovation.

In schools where principals were allowed autonomy with regard to their school's operating budgets and personnel selection, greater opportunities for the maintenance of innovation existed. Principals could establish their own priorities for the purchase of curricular and other materials without necessarily being confined by uniform districtwide purchase policies. Principals were then often able to determine the financial needs of their own schools. Autonomy for principals in hiring personnel was also beneficial since it permitted the selection of persons most qualified to assume positions in the building rather than accepting applicants interviewed and hired at some other level in the school system.

7. Districtwide centralization of the curriculum facilitated innovative practices.

Schools in districts with centralized curricular policies had relatively easy tasks in converting traditional instructional programs to those based on objectives. Objective-based instruction--an important prerequisite to the type of individualized secondary schooling which served as the focus of this study--complemented districtwide curricular policies. Districtwide instructional objectives also facilitated the transfer of students from one school in a district to another, thus creating an arrangement where it was relatively easy to permit open enrollment practices.

8. Extraordinary amounts of external funding were not required to establish and maintain innovative practices.

Although all of the schools had received at least some monetary assistance (from federal, state, or local sources) at some time during the history of their programs, the amount was usually used almost exclusively for planning sessions prior to the initiation of the innovative programs. A frequent use of external funding was to enable staff members to visit other innovative high schools.

9. Formal support systems for the innovative school practices were virtually non-existent.

Although many respondents indicated that formal, mutually-supportive relationships with other innovative high schools and agencies such as nearby universities and regional educational laboratories would be desirable, these relationships were quite limited. Only one school participated in a league of schools which shared similar educational philosophies, an arrangement reported to have a positive effect not only on staff members who could consult with others in similar schools, but also on community members who could see that there were schools similar to their local high school, thus reducing the belief that ' 'ocal school's program was a "fad."

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study revealed a number of issues which should be considered by the staffs of senior high schools planning to implement or refine innovative practices such as a program of individualized schooling.

During the initial stages of implementation, principals must attempt to involve staff members in all aspects of program planning. In this way, staff ownership in the innovative practices is increased.

After an innovative practice has been institutionalized to the extent that it has been integrated into the ongoing activities of the school, continual attempts to bring about total staff involvement are not always necessary or even desirable. Once initial policies and procedures have been established, the staff tends to look

to the principal for direction--instrumental leadership behavior. People do not wish to be involved with efforts to "redecide decisions." Despite this change from participative to instrumental leadership behavior, the principal must always maintain a highly supportive leadership behavior to encourage staff members in their efforts.

Teachers in innovative secondary schools are frequently required to add new dimensions to their traditional roles as instructors. For example, the teacher-advisor program adds new responsibilities for each staff member. Teachers need direction to help them understand their expanded duties. An agency or group within the school might be established to aid teachers continually in defining their new roles. For example, teacher-advisor programs might be coordinated by the guidance department of the high school.

Organized staff development programs are necessary for teachers to maintain a high level of commitment and dedication to existing innovative programs and to increase understanding of emerging programs. Such staff development efforts may be conducted by either the individual school or on a districtwide basis, and may be led by persons assigned permanently to staff development work or by persons recruited on an ad hoc basis from outside the district.

Decentralization of school management across a district facilitates the development and maintenance of innovative practices. Principals, therefore, should be given control over the selection of personnel for their schools. It is also helpful if principals are allowed control over the portion of the district budget allocated to their buildings.

Innovative programs do not appear to need an extraordinary amount of external funding. If additional finances are to be allocated, the time when such funds would be most useful would be during the initial planning phase when money may be

used for staff visits to other schools, consultants, or other types of staff development activities.

Leagues and networks of similarly-organized schools, and cooperative relationships among regional educational laboratories, colleges, and local schools should be encouraged. Where possible, affiliation with other innovative schools must be promoted. This contact should not be limited to principals or other administrators. Teachers, school board members, parents, and other citizens must be brought into contact with and made aware of innovative programs in other schools.

Colleges must examine their teacher training programs to determine their effectiveness in preparing prospective teachers to work not only in innovative schools such as those examined here, but also in any school which encourages teacher participation in decision making or other activities not ordinarily assigned to classroom teachers.

SUMMARY

The study reported in this paper was conducted to examine the ways in which "innovative" practices, such as individualized schooling, are maintained. American secondary education is changing to meet new societal expectations for the future. By not fostering the appropriate support systems and linkage relationships, new secondary school programs will be seen by large segments of the public as unnecessary fads. New practices will be tried and the need will exist to make certain that the practices which are successful in one school can be maintained and shared with other schools.

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